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Banisteriopsis in Witchcraft and Healing Activities in Iquitos, Peru¹

MARLENE DOBKIN DE RÍOS

The use of hallucinogens in healing has received fairly wide analysis in non-Western societies, but only occasionally has reference been made to the use of such substances for purposes of witchcraft (Schultes 1967). As the result of a year's study of folk psychotherapy with ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis* spp.),² the principal active constituent of which is harmine, the author gathered data among the urban poor in an Amazon city slum called Belén, in Iquitos, Peru. Material concerning the use of the woody vine, ayahuasca, both in healing and bewitching activities forms the basis for the following discussion.

Drug-adjuncted ceremonial activities are conducted by specialized healers called *ayahuasqueros*, who assemble men and women from among urban poor as well as middle-class segments of the community. These sessions are held two or three times a week in jungle clearings at the edge of the city, where both patients and healers drink an infusion made from boiling the vine several hours. The drink is often mixed with additives such as *tohé* (*Datura suaveolens*),³ or *chacrana* (*B. Rusbyana*);⁴ on occasion, a tobacco that causes slight dizziness (*Nicotiana Tabacum*?)⁵ may be smoked during

the session. The healer's ritual activity includes exorcising evil spirits that are believed to have entered the sick person's body, perhaps lanced through the air by an evil witch. The healer may blow tobacco smoke over his patient's body or suck at painful parts of it. Special ayahuasca songs (often in Quechua) are whistled and sung through the several hours of drug intoxication. In a series of articles emerging from the year's study (Dobkin de Ríos 1970a, c), culturally delineated syndromes of illness which attribute causality to evil willing of either neighbors or relatives has been described.

Ayahuasca causes profound alterations in consciousness, including changes in time and space perception, rapid mood change, synesthesia, de-personalization and increased suggestibility. Ayahuasca also brings on a state of immobility and incoordination of movement, as well as nausea, occasional heavy vomiting and frequent diarrhea, the latter symptoms marking initial experiences for many. These side effects, however, are highly valued by both patients and healers who believe that the purge (as ayahuasca is called) acts as a cleansing agent that helps restore a sick person to health.

One of the most interesting aspects of ayahuasca use is in bewitching activities. As Herskovitz pointed out long ago (1946), Western dualistic categories of good and evil often do not properly convey non-Western world views concerning black and white magic. For example, although most ayahuasqueros are called upon to heal patients who believe that they have been bewitched, there is an element of moral arbitration on the part of the healer who may and often claims to use counter-magic to return the evil to its perpetrator in order to relieve his patient's symptoms. Easy categorization of good and evil does not adequately deal with the subtleties of ayahuasca use among Peruvian mestizo populations in the rain forest region. Many healers will report that they use the purge only for socially valued ends:

¹ Marlene Dobkin de Ríos, California State College, Fullerton, California. Submitted for publication 10 February 1970.

² Friedberg (1965) has identified several different species of *Banisteriopsis* used in Amazonian healing, as *B. Caapi*, *B. inebrians*, *B. quitensis*, and *B. Rusbyana*. At the time of this writing, voucher specimens were being collected by O. Ríos Reategui for identification. This field study was conducted from June 1968–May 1969, aided by a grant from the Foundations Fund for Research in Psychiatry (in collaboration with O. Ríos Reategui) G67-395. A debt of gratitude is due to Dr. C. A. Sequín, former director of the Institutes of Social Psychiatry, National University of San Marcos, Lima.

³ Identified by Lemlij 1965.

⁴ Identified by der Marderosian 1968.

⁵ Identified by Naranjo 1968.

i.e., to cure illness. Nonetheless, they often recount cases of people who have sought out their help to inflict evil upon others against whom they might bear a grudge, envy or dislike. Although most healers will deny ever using the hallucinogen for evil ends, a class of reputed witches exist, which has received treatment only in literature and folklore (Calvo de Araujo 1963; Hernández 1958, 1960), with any systematic anthropological study completely lacking. These witches (called *brujos*) specialize in using the purge purely for evil ends. Unlike *ayahuasqueros* who heal, these witches collect their fee in advance and not after the patients seems to be getting better. The witches use both "psychic means" and medicines (plants that kill) to effect evil ends. Such plants may be slipped secretly into a beverage at a party or made to fall upon the skin of a victim when he passes a secluded spot. Sometimes, one is told of the series of spirits controlled by witches who are believed to be able to inflict harm upon others.

Before looking in greater detail at ayahuasca's use in bewitching activities, it is useful to discuss a recent study of witchcraft beliefs by Kennedy (1970), who pointed up the similarity of such world-wide belief systems and paranoid delusional states. Kennedy sees witchcraft ideas and practices largely the product of individual psychopathology, which has been systematized and institutionalized by members of diverse groups. He postulated that the content and structure of many such witchcraft systems are similar to psychopathological syndromes that are being discussed in social psychiatric literature today. Despite the danger of using psychiatric nomenclature in ethnocentric labeling of groups whose total range of personality types is wide and complex, Kennedy asks for a reopening of Ruth Benedict's thinking (1934). Although Kennedy would not endorse the notion that a given society could exist if all its members were psychotic, there is good empirical and theoretical reason to suppose that neuroses and other emotionally disordered behavior patterns (which Kennedy sees as a product of early socialization and later stress) can be institutionalized and regularly produced in members of a society, with all other personality

types having to function in terms of the predominant pattern.

Kennedy has delineated eight generalizable characteristics linking witchcraft beliefs and paranoid delusions as follows (Cameron 1959).

1. Impossible content, e.g., mystical causation
2. Unshakeable conviction and certainty
3. Imperviousness to disconfirming experiences
4. Suspiciousness and great fear of external threat
5. Kernels of truth, e.g., real existence of hostility
6. Pseudo-community of real and imagined persons
7. Closed logical system which explains and interprets events
8. Mechanisms of projection as a dominant mode of defending against anxiety.

To test this hypothesis, initial data on ayahuasca use in bewitching activities will be examined. Elsewhere, data on socioeconomic conditions in this rain forest region have been described (Dobkin de Ríos 1969, 1970a), but it is clear that interpersonal relations among the urban poor are anxiety-laden and filled with great tension and strife. This is especially true in terms of economic problems confronting slum residents, as farming lands become scarce, natural resources, such as fish and game fast disappear with indiscriminate use and as inadequate land reform programs or governmental aid in scientific farming remain insufficient for present needs. The daily life of the destitute poor, living in some 20 different slum settlements throughout Iquitos, shows high incidences of social pathology, including family disorganization, abandonment of children, and prostitution. The belief that evil malice exists on the part of others is widespread, and neither relative nor neighbor is exempt from the pervasive belief that, at bottom, people are envious and jealous of others and wish them harm.

Looking at the data available on the use of ayahuasca to bewitch and harm, we find some interesting parallels to the eight point delusional system cited above. The impossible content or mystical causation takes on

a particular hue with the use of ayahuasca. Under the effects of the drug, many people report that they have flown through the air and seen and experienced ephemeral spiritual beings, some of whom they claim to control for ulterior purposes. Some ayahuasqueros are believed to be able invisibly to leave their bodies and enter those of their enemies in order to inflict incurable disease. The name ayahuasca in Quechua, means "vine of the spirits or dead ones," and it attests to the historical reports of this nature. There is some indication that increase in heart beat coming about from ayahuasca use can lead to feelings of flying (Claudio Naranjo, pers. comm.), although the distance between the thought and the activity may be indeed impossible to bridge. As far as the unshakeable conviction and certainty are involved, many conversations with ayahuasqueros report the use of the drug for socially determined positive ends: healing and moral arbitration, when evil magic is returned to its perpetrator. Although I had occasion to see several failures occur in healing activities, ayahuasqueros would never admit to this. They rather attributed any such possible evidence to incomplete ritual observance (i.e., salt, lard or sweets might have been ingested against the healer's instructions.) One can only imagine how a witch would justify his failures to his client should he be unsuccessful in causing the death or disease of an intended victim. One should note, however, that sorcery plays a vital part in witchcraft activities, as most individuals involved in such harmful activities are first rate herbalists, grow their own plants and know their potent toxic properties which can cause all kinds of harm. Goldman (1963), for example, discussed some 36 different poisonous plants used by the Cubeo of the northwest Amazon.

The imperviousness to disconfirming experience also would be confirmed by the foregoing. Suspiciousness and fear of external threat did characterize my few encounters with reputed witches in Belén. Once, an alleged witch overreacted in the presence of my colleague (a psychiatrist) at a magical session, when the reputed witch inadvertently had not been advised that my colleague was a medical doctor. The reputed witch came to see me the next day

to accuse me of having tried to put one over on him. I must admit he watched my house quite carefully, and I feared that his suspicion of police action initiated by me would lead to dire results (such as being poisoned).

Kennedy's postulate of "kernels of truth" present in delusional systems would seem to be verified from the ayahuasca data. It is true that many medical doctors, quite close in time and space to folk healing and harming practices, regard such healers as competition and are not at all adverse to swearing out police complaints against them. In particular, this occurs when attempts at bewitching are reported to the police or a medical practitioner. One healer continually avoided his home when my colleague and I first visited him, since he knew that one of us was a doctor and, therefore, a possible enemy.

As far as the pseudo-community of real and imagined persons goes, my data seem to differ from those of some social anthropologists, like Middleton (1963), who see witchcraft activity as merely a system of beliefs, having little if any locus in reality. Although many of the data are inferential and serendipitous, people will, in confidence, point out a witch to whom a relative has actually paid money, in order to cause harm. In addition, all ayahuasqueros who were queried about healing activities, mentioned that people often sought their services to cause harm to others. Some healers state that they are good Christians or moral persons and thus refuse to undertake such activities. However, these clients do manage to find others to oblige them. The pseudo-community of imagined persons is often discussed by healers and informants alike and is believed to comprise a series of animistic spirits who are controlled by witches and at whose bidding will inflict evil upon others. Some of these spirits are believed to reside in the forest itself, while others are said to live under the river or deep within lagoons.

The belief in witchcraft activity, sustained by the powerful hallucinogen, ayahuasca, would appear to be a closed logical system and has certain sustaining mechanisms. Given acculturative forces in the presence of 20th Century medicine, when a person becomes ill, he may seek help from

a *sanitario*, a badly trained medical aide, who administers penicillin and other antibiotic injections. Since there is little care taken about the type of medicine used or how it is administered, many people become worse after seeing the *sanitario*. Informants often cite this worsening of the patient as proof that one is bewitched, since the city medicine will not work under such magical circumstances of bewitchment. It is at this point that a counter-magician is sought to return the evil to its source of origin. The use of ayahuasca is seen as magically important in terms of its visual hallucinogenic effects, since these visions are interpreted by the healer in identifying the originator of the evil. The patient's pictorial or symbolic representations are discussed with the healer, whose role it is to re-establish equilibrium in the realm of health. The ayahuasca plant is seen to possess a jealous guardian spirit, who can be propitiated by a certain diet regimen. Many explanations can be cited to show how ayahuasca healing occurs (Dobkin de Ríos 1970c), but heightened suggestibility during the overwhelming sensory overload may be a major factor in the person's attending to the ayahuasquero's counseling activity. Even inferences concerning witches' acknowledgment of failure would no doubt bring forth explanations of lack of ritual performance on the part of the client who did not recite the proper spell, or perhaps, that counter-magic was too powerful to permit the intended harming of the victim.

Finally, in terms of the mechanisms of projection as the dominant mode of defending against anxiety, the above discussion should point up to a limited degree the nature of social and economic problems that haunt the footsteps of many slum residents and the great amount of interpersonal strife. In many ways, beliefs in witches and evil-willing correspond to Spiro's notion of culturally constituted defense mechanisms (1967:78-9), which enable people to deal with real problems of survival and stability.

An examination of field data on ayahuasca has shown that one cannot examine the use of hallucinogenic healing in the Peruvian Amazon region without a complementary analysis of witchcraft beliefs and activities.

This paper has attempted to remedy the great neglect in the use of hallucinogens such as *Banisteriopsis* to bewitch. Using data on ayahuasca and bewitching activity, a test was made of Kennedy's hypothesis that relates witchcraft beliefs to paranoid delusional states: the major premises linking these two phenomena has been confirmed by the data. It is hoped that testing of this hypothesis with future field data will point up some important areas of hallucinogenic use in witchcraft activity throughout the Peruvian rain forest region.

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